

GOD FAR - GOD NEAR

September 27, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 1:1-5,14

"And the Word became flesh..."

-John 1:14 (RSV)

The late C. S. Lewis was a very traditional churchman. When there was a change in clerical leadership in his parish church he quipped, wryly, "I don't care what order of worship the new rector uses, provided he doesn't change it." [See David H. C. Read, Grace Thus Far, p. 70] When I read that last summer, I knew I had my entree' to a sermon that had to be preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, on September 27, 1987.

I considered opening with Martin Marty's prediction that the last seven words of the church will be - "But we always did it that way." But that sounds a little defensive, so I decided not to use it.

I thought about quoting Arthur Schlesinger's fine new book, The Cycles of American History, in which he observed - "The accumulation of change enables us to perceive life as motion; not as order... For people of buoyant courage... the prospect is exhilarating... Others, in the midst of flounder and flux, strive to resurrect the old ways."

I even thought about using Schlesinger's trenchant comment... "In times of change everyone becomes his own Landmarks Preservation Commission," [Forward, p. XI] but decided that was a loaded and suggestive comment that might be misunderstood.

I considered invoking Alvin Toffler on the "end of the stable state" and the futurist movement to the effect that the only predictable reality is that all bets are off, nothing is predictable any more, fluidity, flexibility and change are the only things you can count on...

But I decided that all sounded brash and a little defensive and more than a little nervous. Besides, the biggest media event of the year happened two weeks ago around the visit of a religious leader who tried to

Jews around the Passover Table,
Mass in Dodger Stadium,
Pentecostals speaking in tongues,
Base Communities in El Salvador, talking freedom,
House Churches in Peking (Beijing), praying secretly.

In a perfectly delightful book, Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner writes, "To worship God means to serve Him. Basically, there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for Him that He needs to have done - run errands... carry messages... fight on his side, feed His lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for Him that you need to do - sing songs for Him, create beautiful things for Him, give things up for Him, tell Him what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in Him and make a fool of yourself for Him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love." [Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, p. 97-98]

Worship falls in the second category - things we need to do. That, it seems to me, is elemental. We worship because of our need, not any longer because of societal expectations; not because an ecclesiastical council says we must worship; not because there is a heavenly truant officer who takes attendance every Sunday. The need is ours. It has something to do with a very basic need to express love. Even if we Presbyterians aren't exactly spontaneous about it, in fact wouldn't think of allowing ourselves to appear publicly out of control - foolish - there is in it a deep and profound love for God and joy in God's presence and happiness in God's promise. Once all of that is acknowledged we Presbyterians do have some specific ideas about worship.

We believe that worship is, first of all, an activity. Worship is something which we, the people do. Part of the Protestant Reformation was about participatory worship. In the Middle Ages worship had become pretty much a spectator activity, performed by professionals which people watched. How ironical that after a few hundred years we seem to be back where we started, with clergy doing it all, laity watching. Reformers would not have liked the fact that in most Protestant churches clergy do most of the praying.

Soren Kierkegaard, Danish theologian, characterized Protestant worship in a way that retains its accuracy, unfortunately. People go to church, Kierkegaard proposed, in the same frame of mind with which they attend the theater or a concert. They gather to sit as an audience, to have something done for them, to listen, to watch. The main actor in the drama is the preacher, the supporting cast consists of choir, liturgists, organists, ushers. God is the prompter who, one hopes, on occasion helps the cast with the performance. Whether it works or not, Kierkegaard observed acidly, depends on how the performance goes and how the audience feels when it is over. If the people have been entertained, inspired, made to laugh or cry, if the music has been heroic and beautiful, worship has worked. But if the performance has been poor, God forbid, the sermon lackluster, the anthem sour, the organ too loud, worship doesn't work and people spend the rest of the day critiquing it - as if they had just spent forty dollars for a theater seat.

Now this is not an apology for shoddiness or carelessness. If worship is for God's sake then it should and will be done here with as much excellence as we can muster. But Kierkegaard was surgically precise, I believe, in his analysis. The theater metaphor is accurate he said, but in worship the people of the congregation are the actors and God is the audience. The prompters are minister, choir, organist, liturgists. Their job is not to perform - but to help the congregation worship. People come to worship, in this scenario, not to be entertained but to do something, to express something that needs to be expressed, to give something of themselves to God.

There is a dangerous heresy abroad in American Protestantism - writes Donald MacLeod of Princeton. It is that you go to church to get something. It results in a common response to public worship: namely "I didn't get anything out of that," which, MacLeod maintains, is only possible when you put nothing of yourself in it. Worship is a verb, an activity which worshippers do.

We Presbyterians also understand it to be a corporate act, something people do together. Now, next to "I didn't get anything out of it," which we might call the consumer theology of worship, the next American heresy is the theology of rugged individualism. It sounds like this: "I don't have to go to church to worship. I can worship alone. In fact I find the first tee at the club at 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning quite worshipful, thank you." Beginning with John Calvin who understood worship as something the gathered church does, and in which scattered individuals become a church, we Presbyterians have insisted that while you can pray, meditate, appreciate the world and sing hymns alone, you need someone else to join you for it to be worship. It is, by our lights, no more plausible to worship alone than it is to play a set of tennis by yourself. "Protestant theologian W. Paul Jones, in an essay on worship wrote, "Weekly worship focuses not so much on personal problems or on creating energy for the coming week as on being reconstituted by losing ourselves in the meaning of the whole. Our enormous trivia is put into perspective." [Weavings, 9/10/82, p. 10]

Worship is an act. It is corporate. And it is orderly. There is an internal logic to it. One thing leads to another for a discernible purpose. One of our oldest documents, The Directory for Worship, says that in Presbyterian public worship things are to be done "decently and in order and that careless worship may be an offense to God and a stumbling block to His people."

We believe that there is an orderly process of worship and that it has been dictated, basically, in that magnificent sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah and is something like this: -

First, praise, adoration of God, followed by a confession of the distance between ourselves and God, and that followed by a declaration of God's grace, forgiveness, reconciliation. Then the Word - read, sung, spoken - a corporate act of listening followed by a corporate response to what has been affirmed and spoken... in The Creed, the prayers of God's people. And finally, an act both symbolic and real; both ritual but also existential; an act which from the very beginning of Israel's worship has

been the climax, the high point - the purpose of it all - the offering of gifts including our lives, hearts, souls, minds, bodies, to the service of Christ and Christ's Kingdom on earth.

That is the pattern we have adopted: Praise, Confession, Word, Response, Self-giving. It is the pattern of the Churches of the Reformation. It is not only not new, it is our oldest worship tradition.

Worship is an act. It is corporate. It is orderly. And finally, worship intends something astonishing: to put us in touch with God - as a gathered congregation, and as individuals sitting in our pews for a thousand different reasons, with a thousand different agendas and expectations; with a thousand different understandings. Worship, quite simply, intends to bring you into relationship with the one who created you and gave you life; the one who has provided for your salvation; the one who promises to stand with you forever. That is no small purpose. That is no modest agenda.

God Far and God Near. The God beyond creation, the God beyond anything we can think and imagine; God who comes to us, loves us, heals and saves us - personally.

In the Isaiah passage we heard this morning both of those ideas find expression. The prophet was in the Temple and had a remarkable vision of God's majesty and holiness and mystery. That experience also revealed the man's humanity, his finiteness, in a new way. "Woe is me, O Lord... for I have seen the Lord of hosts." Then God comes near; Isaiah's lips are touched with a burning coal and God commissions him for a life of discipleship. In the Bible worship begins with the awesome otherness of God, what Rudolf Otto called the "mysterium tremendum," with the smoke and incense - mystery and holiness, and then moves to a dimension that could only be called intimate.

So also, in the New Testament Lesson, it begins with God's otherness, mystery and eternity. "In the beginning was The Word." And then moves quickly to the immediate, the intimate, the human. "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

Worship begins with an idea so big it is essentially inexpressible except by metaphor and poem and song. Worship begins with Isaiah trembling in the Temple, or Moses removing his shoes before a burning bush. Worship starts with something not quite fear but not far from it; with a lump in the throat, with you and I walking into this sanctuary and being reminded of the most astonishing of all suggestions - there is a God. A God who defies description, a God who will not ultimately be confined to our creeds, our hymns, sermons and prayers.

Simply by being here you have made a powerful statement. It must be read against the background of a secular culture which pays only lip service to it. The philosophers have a wonderful German word they use to describe the thought of a culture. They call it the Zeitgeist - the spirit of the times. The Zeitgeist is secular. We are - or like to think we are - children of a scientific, technological culture that very much wants us to know our self sufficiency, that there are no mysteries we cannot

understand, that we stand alone in this universe, tall, proud, defiant, supermen and superwomen, autonomous, independent.

Yet, if there is anything history teaches us with consistency it is that human beings need a God in order to be human; that left to our own devices we come up with the demonic horrors of the Third Reich or the oppressive grayness of the People's Republic or the mindless materialism of American consumerism. We need nothing so much as a sense of mystery of the unfathomable and inexplicable, just to remain fully human.

Art helps, which is why totalitarianism systems keep a careful eye on the artists. Vincent Van Gogh, who wrestled with traditional religion all his life wrote once: "I can do very well without God, both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something that is greater than I, which is my life - a power to create." [Sam Keen, An Apology for Wonder]

And Dag Hammarskjöld: "God does not die on the day I cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." [Markings, p. 56]

Worship begins here for all of us with the simple, yet astonishing idea that God is. Worship begins with six-winged Seraphim and full organ, and the smoke of incense in the Temple - with God Far.

And it proceeds, in counterpoint, with that next most astonishing idea: namely that God Far has come Near; that the God of infinite complexity has come among us in infinite simplicity; that mystery and power have expressed themselves in a baby born in a manger; that the power behind earthquake, wind and storm was best revealed in a young man bravely dying on a cross on a Friday afternoon.

Hans Kung, in a recent book comparing our Judeo/Christian Traditions with the great world religions says: "Our God can be reached in prayer and meditation, praised in joy and gratitude, accused in distress and despair. God is a God before whom we can genuflect in awe, pray and sacrifice, make music and dance." [Christianity and The World Religions]

When all the theologizing and philosophizing is done, when we have thought and analyzed and exegeted as thoroughly as we know how, our dearest and most profound faith is that God can be reached - not only thought about but experienced. When we've said everything our considerable intellects allow us to say, there remains the God whose realm is above and beyond our intellects, who dwells in mysterious light and who bends low to come to us, whose spirit is present with us as closely and intimately as the air we breathe.

That's why we're here. It might take us a long time to be able to explain it, and maybe we never could get all the reasons. But something like that is the reason why most of us gave up a perfectly good Sunday morning at home with the newspaper and a second cup of coffee or a walk along the lake and put on our Sunday best and came to this place with great expectations.

We hope to meet God. It's a "hunger for holiness" someone said recently... and it is deeply a part of our humanity.

I experience it regularly whenever I miss a Sunday or two... Something is missing, slightly out of sync, the rhythm isn't there... Oh, I know about strong force of habit (remember my grandfather setting his alarm clock?)... And I know personally the legendary conditioned response system of the preacher which on a Sunday morning fuels and fires us like thoroughbreds on derby day, or a hound dog on the first day of hunting season. It's a little of that but it's a lot more as well.

It's a hunger; a need of mine. When I'm away a while I miss it. I start thinking about it, anticipating it, looking forward to the weight of worship that falls benevolently, graciously on my shoulders whenever I am privileged to sit down in the midst of God's people and pray with them and sing "Holy, Holy," and hear about God's Word with them.

In the middle of an extended sailing trip with Presbyterian friends, we all felt it. And so on a Sunday morning, anchored in the harbor beside Marion, Massachusetts, someone said "let's go to church." So we assembled the best outfits we could muster and got into the dinghy at nine or so and discovered the First Congregational Church... It was wonderful. The congregation was tiny but like a lot of other occasions when the human input is ordinary, there was something extraordinary going on and we were privileged to be part of it. God's people were worshipping, praising and rejoicing, hearing God's Word, putting the occasional trivia of life into perspective, giving of themselves in gratitude... and it was good.

It surprises me - this hunger... and the simplicity of its resolution. It surprises all of us at times in exhilarating experiences of wonder and also in the most intimate moments which have something transcendent, mysterious and holy about them: the birth of a baby, the making of love, the communion of deep friendship, the wordless communication between parent and child... all given and blessed by the God who comes so very close.

God Far ... God Near. Worship intends nothing less than for you to experience both... that God, in almightiness and mystery and holiness knows your name, loves you and is touched by your worship.

We don't always think through our reasons for being here, Holy God. Give us some sense of your majesty. And then, help us to know your nearness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.